

# The TARRAGONA TRIUMPH Travelogue

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London

2004

England,

before departure

A few days back, my cousin says his flight out to meet me once I've ridden to Spain has been called off and now being June, he doesn't know if he will get another in time.

What I get, after a whole year of preparation, is a hollow feeling, cold, sure this plan to buy property and turning it into an eco-adventure tourist business is no more than a juvenile pipe dream. I consider delaying my departure, but July is coming and with it all hotel and food prices in France go up by 30%. I'll never get a refund for my ferry booking either. I consider forgetting Spain, catching the ferry and heading East, for Poland, surprise people back home again, but I don't feel like it. This will be my first long-distance bike blast, my first real trip abroad (years of going back to Poland and four days in Paris last year don't count). Quitting this early on in such an enterprise seems like bad form.

Then, on Sunday, riding down to Brighton for a beach barbeque, the Triumph's indicators stop working. The dash lights went out weeks ago, but this is a really bad omen. Once I get back to London, I check the electrics, find nothing. Plus, the gear change sounds and feels like a box of broken spanners every time I shift up. Two thousand miles without indicators or changing gear? I've also left all the digital camera cables at my mother's (another three hour cross-London detour) and when I check my bank balance, it's a hell of a lot less healthy than I need it to be.

On Monday, I phone round, find no repair shop will check the electrics, all far too busy this sunshine season. Fuck it. Time is running out and Monday afternoon a woman from South Bank University observes me teaching at the prison. A group of teenage inmates I've never met before pile into an overcrowded, overheated room where the windows don't open and tempers don't cool. I try to teach them something about the alphabet and how to decode used car ads, but it's the massive fight in a classroom next door really grabs their attention. They nearly run over the South Bank woman in the rush to get to the door and join in, but I somehow manage to stop them leaving. Half force, half negotiation, enough to impress the observer.

Once she leaves, I tell my boss I'm starting my holiday a day early and set off for the gates myself. Too many things have gone wrong in the last few days, too many need fixing tomorrow for me to be here, struggling behind bars.

I spend all next morning going through the electrics, riding back and forth to bike shops with spare parts and other bits for the trip, counting down hours before I have to pack my bags and get to bed, ready for a 5am start. Can't get the indicators working, but manage to find a place that will change the drive chain for me. Sets me back a hundred quid I can ill-afford, but it's the first bit of good luck I've had in a week. I grab the camera cables from my mother's and ride home to pack. Send emails to all property dealers and locals I'm due to meet in Spain, stash my gear into two rucksacks and get to bed around eleven. The weather reports predict rain for the morning. Good. Better the devil you know with a thousand miles to do in two days flat.

Wednesday, the trip starts with the same motorway route I take to work every day, but it's sunny and the bike feels good with a new chain on it.

Hard to write about first impressions of long-distance motorbike riding. Physically, the stillness is testing. Holding on to the bars at ninety mph hour after hour is hard work, though no movement is involved. Mentally, it's tiring too. Just about anything could have you off the bike - the vicious side-wind blast each time you overtake a lorry, a rock thrown up by the wheels of a car ahead (ever see what they do to windscreens?), a patch of diesel or other debris on the tarmac. You keep your eyes off the scenery, your mind off the thousand things you want to mull over as hours fly by, watching the speed, the mirrors, listening to the engine for any sounds of trouble, counting the miles and minutes to the next petrol station and five minute fag.

EnglishChannel

On the Dover-Calais ferry, the route through France I decided on two weeks ago is changed. I've only done two hours of English motorways so far, but if the boredom is anything to go by, I'll need to avoid the flatlands of Bordeaux and head for the mountainous bends of the Central Massif to keep me awake.

France

What I do to Paris is ugly - just bypass it altogether. The Peripherique is the maddest road I've ridden yet. 40 Celsius on my keyfob thermometer, cars packed tight in three or four lanes of traffic and French bikers cutting through them at insane speeds. Any car changes lane or chucks a lit fag out their window, wipeout, but they don't seem to care. Little scooters, full-dress BMW tourers, they just stick on their hazard warning lights and shoot off through gaps barely inches wider than their machines. My indicators are not working, but my sense of self-preservation more than compensates. I crawl on, the Eiffel Tower just visible for a second in the distance, promise myself I will try to see it close-up on the way back.

Paris is the last major marker on the map before Barcelona. Now I've just got to slide down France, cross the Pyrenees, stop my momentum a few hundred miles into Spain.

I aim for Bourges, my first scheduled overnight stop. The blur of afternoon miles is literally that, a blur. Endless road signs, endless straights, endless overtakes. The light is memorable. As the day wears on and my body begins to suffer, sunlight goes from the characterless glare of noon to the rich, rewarding hues of early evening. Shadows lengthen, colours deepen, the last stages of the day's ride both a physical pain and a sensual feast.

By the time I limp off the motorway, around seven, my eyes are sore from the windblast, my ears from the plugs I wear under the helmet (the wind noise is otherwise unbearable), my shoulders from holding on, my knees from being bent at the same angle since dawn broke. Yet when I find a little road-side hotel just outside Bourges, I unpeel myself from the bike without complaint. This is the first time I've ever stayed in a hotel. I've stayed in B&B's, in mountain lodges, in rented apartments, in holiday huts, in tents, in any kind of holiday accommodation you can think of, except hotels. But I've read about them. Read lots. Seen them in endless films, on album covers, heard people talk about them in documentaries, on the radio, everyone trying to get at the heart of the hotel experience. And now it's my turn. To see if I'll fit. If I'll feel lonely like all the rest. Or if I'll feel just a little bit at home.

The hotel is expensive and anonymous. No bar, no character, but at least the staff speak English. Just about everyone in France speaks English, even though whenever I ask "Parlez vous Ingles?", they always sheepishly admit "A little..." as if ashamed. Ashamed of not speaking a foreign language in their own land. The room is small and everything in it has the stiffness of unused or over-starched things. The bed, the curtains, the towels. There is a tv, some flowery furnishings, a tiny hairdryer and kettle meant to complement my stay. Part of me wants to get a cheap bottle of wine and get smashed in this sterile cell as antidote to the road, but I haven't got a bottle with me and the town is just two minutes away.

The bike feels different without the tons of luggage strapped to the back. Not in terms of handling, but in spirit. Now no longer workhorse, it is taking me to see places instead of past them, our journey all about quality for a change.

(Historic) Bourges is cute. And wickedly quiet. No shops are open, nowhere to buy wine, but I'm happy. Happy to find places where late night shopping is an unknown concept. The streets are narrow, some cobbled, and there is a warmth to the place I like. It's in the pale coloured town-houses, the flowers sprouting from window boxes and hanging from baskets, in the friendly nature of sunlight here.

The streets are charming and the cathedral at the top of the town magnificent, but somehow I don't have the energy for admiring architecture. When you only have half an evening, one cathedral is much like another. I find a bar with a Union Jack hanging up inside. Strange, considering Euro 2004 is still on, but this is the kind of place nobody gives a fuck about football. A wreck of an elderly lady drinking rum, smoking, giving the barmaid grief. Dark, handsome guys sitting round the bar, something lost in their eyes. And women who somehow know, just by looking at me, that I'm only passing through, that I'm no use to them at all.

The Union Jack is a con. Nobody in the bar speaks English, but I manage to get a beer out of them anyway. Sitting outside, watching a little roundabout go about its business, feels good. On my right, there's a cemetery, some kids old enough for fags but not yet for alcohol, having quiet conversations. On my left, a theatre, parents with their offspring leaving a music practice, instrument carrying cases of various shapes and sizes hanging from young shoulders. Even though it's ten, they don't seem to be in a rush, home probably just minutes away. Lots of motorbikes and scooters buzzing past. Big and small, new and old, a fat policeman on the smallest and slowest of them all. Beer glass half full, I feel happy. The intensity of the setting blue sky, setting on this first day on the road, washes through my wasted spirits and keeps me smiling to myself, language nothing to do with why no one around understands this moment, no one can do anything but add to its stillness.

Then I ride home. Back to the hotel. No wine, but no mood for sleep either. The body's tired, but the mind restless. All day it's been busy, looking out for hazards, making sure I'm on the right road, not too far from the next petrol station, but it's all very narrow waveband stuff, very mechanical. I shower, drop onto the stiff,

cool sheets, turn on the tv to find Scorsese's "Gangs of New York" premiering on Canal+. Though I know I should be sleeping, readying myself for the next day, after all day of fear out on the road, of steeling myself for the violence that never came, it feels good to have it finally explode on screen. Makes for peaceful dreams.

## Travelogue2

A woman I had lived with once invited me to the flat she had rented after our split. I couldn't understand why she was so proud of the place, the colours she'd chosen for walls, the shelves she'd put up and other details that helped make the place hers. But I understand it now. Having stayed in nothing but hotels for the past two weeks, I understand the difference between homes. Knowing her now, the differences between us, why she was so proud of that flat and why it was such a joy to her to have something permanent underfoot.

I've never been there. Never rented a place I thought I'd be in for long. Never bought or considered buying my own. I've lived on council estates, in posh city-centre flats, quiet suburban houses, cliff-top bungalows, for a year or two at a time, never thinking about settling down, never once considering mortgages or property ladders or any permanent states of being. My dream home is a caravan parked on a piece of land that is mine. Maybe that's why hotel rooms fit me. Why there's no sense of separation between their way of life and mine.

## France, day two

I leave Bourges well-rested. It takes me five minutes to go from cosy room to motorway and motion again.

I remember the bike finally feeling happy somewhere past Clermont-Ferrand. The landscape had risen with the sun, noon flowing through high gorges and rock-strewn rivers, the road a mad mess of hairpin bends. The signs suddenly started reading 90 or 70 instead of 130kph, but I kept my right hand twisted, the speedo needle where it was before. Now being on two wheels begun to make sense. There is no skill in going fast in a straight line, none. It's in the twisties, leant right over at serious motorway speeds, that the adrenaline kicks in, that the dance begins, the work, fighting the front down, focusing on the next apex, overtaking all those who've dutifully slowed down. On a bike, you slow in corners, you miss the point.

Maybe only three, four miles of this spaghetti-road treatment, but I'll remember it forever. Race pace. Breakneck. Moments stay with you right up until the instant you die.

By late afternoon, I keep expecting to see the Mediterranean. The mountains even out, the trees turn to arid shrubs, the air has a hazy quality I associate with something blown in from Africa. And it's Africa, not the sea before it, meets me first. Twenty kilometres from the coast, I think a stone has bust the radiator, drained it of fluid, overcooked the engine. The blast furnace heat that meets me just past Lodeve is unbelievable. I'm ready to stop, save the engine from seizing, throw the visor of my helmet open and the same heat just rushes in. It's not the engine. It's the air here. Christ, it was just an instant, a bend, a brow of a hill and the world's changed by a dozen degrees.

The heat continues all the way to the coast, past Montpellier, Beziers, to Valras-Plage, where I almost get lost in a little town full of dazed locals giving me directions in French. A couple of gendarmes point me to a hotel a hundred metres from the beach, from my first taste of the Mediterranean. My room is large and furnished

with cheap bits of wicker and veneer, and there's no complimentary kettle, but the place is wonderfully empty and the pool is like the million pictures I've seen in films and holiday brochures. Baby blue, surrounded by white lawn furniture and low palms and completely free of people. I want to dive in, but after another nine-hour stint in the saddle, I need a beer and the hotel, again, lacks a decent bar.

The beach, like the rest of town, is empty, the sand darker than I expected. The sea as cold as in Brighton, a solitary woman in a pink bikini standing waist-high, not moving, seemingly unaffected by the temperature. Far off to my right, in an ash-blue mist, the Pyrenees make grand promises for the last leg of my journey tomorrow.

The seafront is perfect. Low buildings and only two bars. One a kebab place manned by a skinny black guy with steady English. I order a couple of Kronenburgs, sit outside, watch him doodling in a sketch book. I'd like to get to know more about his life here, in this pre-season limbo land, but I've never been too hot at small talk and don't manage to get far. Just sit there, watching the sea and sky melt into azure darkness, picking sand from between my toes before putting my shoes back on.

The other bar is a mini-discothèque, right next door, Thursday nights serving up karaoke. In spite of the heavy heat still hanging over the place, I sit inside, order a beer, get my notebook out.

Sitting in the best karaoke bar in the world, trying to work out what it is I miss.

*I'm meant to miss something. Families in here, red-faced French people, insane decoration (high ceilings, pillars camouflaged as palm trees with brown paint running down the plaster, far too many disco lights for a place this claustrophobic). Pot bellied owner, his wife on high heels and flowing mini, their cute, chubby teen daughter running round, chasing a dog. Sailor-bearded karaoke DJ in full sentimental flow singing "Pour qua?" and I don't have an answer. I just need beer to make me even warmer than I am already.*

*All French songs sound the same and all French beer tastes of cherries.*

*Good to see French people get sunburnt and can't dress on holiday either.*

*For all that, there is a longing in this karaoke session I don't relate to England. It's not just the feel of the language, the DNA of Gainsbourg and Piaf, but some other, higher longing.*

*There's a forceful wind now blowing the evening into the place. 80 proof Ricard on top of the bar, a live-wire feel native to a place just across the bay from Africa.*

*The sad shortarse studying the karaoke list like it was a racing form, his butch little woman flirting with the sweaty pissheads at the bar. She's wearing a leather mini, but her armpits are shaven. See it as she dances, the only one in the place, the DJ belting out songs with bear-like charm. The shortarse has two pouches strapped to his belt, one for his mobile, one for what looks like a knife.*

*Place like this reeks of rushed summers - the manic disco lights, voices chasing lyrics across the karaoke screen, struggling to emulate art, kids running around, trying to ignore their parents' drinking. It's not enough, it's not even not enough.*

*With the sky slate-blue outside, this place, after three beers, feels like humble heaven.*

*And then the DJ sings "Satisfaction".*

Watching places like that is great when you're only passing through. The same goes for hotels. There's an organised impermanence to them I almost wish existed every day of my life. You walk in, order a room, smile at the proprietor, they smile back. You can't communicate, but it's all right. I'm the customer, I'll be judging him and he's ready. They show you a room you've never seen before, even though it's just like all the others, you drop your bags, the barest essentials of what you are, and accept. Fresh towels, a remote that half-works, surfaces and fabrics you will never ever have to clean yourself. It's enough. For a life on the move, for any life, it's enough.

I bring a couple of bottles back from the kebab place and crash on the bed. *I'm meant to miss something..* but I don't. Don't feel any hollowness around me.

Some part of that must be self-deception. Earlier, sitting on the beach or outside the kebab place, I kept thinking of who to text from my mobile phone. If not for fear of theft, I'd have left it at the hotel, but I didn't and so I sent texts to friends in England and Poland, a little teasing description of where I was at. Physically. But emotionally? Even on this page, I struggle to describe that. Friends were far away, women even further, but while the phone brought them no closer, it was still close enough. Virtual distances. Displaced associations. Moving and yet always looking back, thinking of people left behind, strangely alone.

I never wanted that. Solitude, yes, but never loneliness. And I am lonely, that's a fact, though I don't feel it, which is why I'm not suffering. Which is why hotel rooms are no change from my usual lifestyle, even back home. They're just more romantic than sharing a council flat with your father.

I'm lonely because I wish for people who are either far away or don't exist in my life, but that wish has gotten so weak, I fear for my psyche. It is an educated fear, by which I mean it is a fear I experience logically not emotionally. I fear for myself in theory. Fear for an older age, when empty hotel rooms and speed runs from somewhere to somewhere else will not be enough.

But for now, lying on a hard king-size bed, watching football highlights in French, wind off the Bay of Lion rattling the curtains, putting out fag ends into bottles I will not have to worry about taking to the recycling dump, I feel free and still and even if not in the right place, maybe not even on the way there, at peace in between.

Travelogue3

France, day three

The morning goes wrong. After oiling the new drive chain and checking fluid levels before setting back off into the sun, the bike crashes over as I strap luggage to the rear seat. It takes all the strength I have to lift it back up onto the stand, blood and sweat boiling with anger more than anything else. Anger at myself. I know how top-heavy the machine is, the stationary accident all my fault. It's happened before with this bike and I should've been more careful, careful enough, but my mind was already on the road, sailing at speed, even though I'm still in the hotel car park, fucking about with luggage straps and bungee cords. Biking is all about being in the moment, ever there, ever ready, and anyone whose attention wanders shouldn't go near anything with this much power, and if everyone's attention wanders from time to time then no one should ride, and though this is the truth, it's one we choose to ignore for the thrill ignorance brings. Gravity never sleeps, which is why no biker is ever safe, why biking is Quixotic full-stop. And all the poetry and appropriateness of place makes

the injury no less insulting.

I bear the failure without managing a grin, the road out of town a set of unsteady curves and roundabouts. I've only bent the clutch lever and warped the left handlebar half an inch out of shape, but it's enough to unsettle my riding rhythm. Dropping a motorcycle, even at standstill, feels like a betrayal, like a relationship gone wrong. When you get back on, you're angry and mistrustful, the honeymoon over, the dream gone sour. You try to recover what you had before, the innocence, but it's hard. You want to believe it was just a one-off, a momentary loss of self-control, but you know better. Machines, and people.

I rejoin the motorway, the damage to the bike apparently superficial, but in my heart the earlier incident has poisoned the road ahead. I blast past Narbonne and Perpignan, watch land rise as I approach the border. The sea is invisible from between the mountains, but the heat never lets you forget you're all the time nearing the Equator.

Blasting along the coast, my eyes turn right and meet the unexpected. Twenty, thirty miles off, the Pyrenees appear out of the grey-blue sky. The spectacle is breathtaking. While the foundations remain hidden in the distance, the snow-laden peaks, reflecting sunlight, glow a silvery white, thousands of metres above sea level. Mountains have always had the power to stun me, but the image of those translucent monsters suspended mid-air as if by some mystical, foreign force, is hard to accept without platitudes getting in the way of description.

I will be there soon, my mind says, over and over again (even the imagination gets repetitive after two and a half days of motorway). I can't wait to race those sky-humbling incisors, every twist and turn a blessing, a mystery revealed, a buzz almighty.

Between France and Spain

High up on a mountain pass, as cars queue for the passport control booths, I line up behind them and remove my helmet like I would when boarding ferries across the Channel. Easier for officials to match my passport photo to my face.

Another mistake. All they want to do is wave people on, but when they see me approach bare-headed, they pull me over like a criminal. I knew my first stab at Spanish would be hard, but I didn't expect it to turn ugly. They go through all my papers, accept no explanations, no smiles, refuse to listen to obvious reason - no fucking way would I have been riding on the motorway like that, no way would I have flaunted it before them. Still, they keep me waiting in a sun-baked customs car park with a couple of Albanian car smugglers, waiting to be told what I know, that all my papers are ok and that I should never try to stick my neck out when bureaucracy is involved.

After fifteen minutes of steaming in the mountain sun, I pack my documents away, swallow my pride along with a moronic bollocking, ride on into a new land I may yet one day call home.

Somewhere before Girona, the rev counter starts going mental. Sitting at eighty mph, I know it should be showing around six thousand rpm, but suddenly it's stuck at five. When I gun the engine, the needle drops instead of rising, and when I slow back down again, it rises instead of falling. Then crashes down to zero as if I'd hit the kill switch, even though I'm still sitting at eighty. Then wakes and bounces right back to five. Mad, and very disconcerting. Most of the things that go wrong with machines are easily explained and usually easy to fix, but then there are the gremlins, the strange half-faults that defy remedy. Hiding deep in the

wiring or somewhere else in the bodywork, they usually appear at speed and not when in the mechanics garage, or come and go at will, or like this one, seem to affect nothing other than my mood. What's causing this fault? Oil pressure dropped? The heat? Something in the electrics? Dash lights gone, indicators still out, now this? What will go next? I can do without the rev counter, but what if the speedo follows? Hard enough to constantly be converting miles into kilometres without having that die as well.

I have arranged to meet an English couple in a place between the border and Barcelona. Found them on the net, while researching the whole Spanish business. They have a house near the coast, a couple of craft/design businesses and a garage full of motorcycles. Way before Barcelona, I swoop off the motorway and get closer to something akin to new country.

Now I'm on local roads, long stretches of flat, straight tarmac, cutting through fields of arid earth and sparse wheat and towns of white, subtly decorated architecture. After more than two days of non-stop motorways, this slower, smaller landscape is perfect relief.

I stop for petrol. The station is very different to the motorway services I've got accustomed to. A smiling woman, chubby yet firm with warm energy, says Hola! and fills up the bike for me.

I buy an ice cream and smoke a cigarette round the back of the station building, just to spend a little while there. The land is empty and the sea is in the sky, the coast almost tangible a couple of miles off. Dry grasses flutter in the breeze. A kid with a broken-down scrambler hides in the shade behind the building, sad and silent. His bike is half the size of mine, but we smile to each other anyway.

It is hot, but not oppressively so. I'm tired, yet happy to see some land close up for a change. The crickets are crackling in the heat, the breeze just about audible, the sun calling for siesta. I don't want to move. Like everything in sight, I want to be completely still. Movement robs you of shade and energy, but the ice cream and the cigarette are gone all too quickly and the bike is waiting, hungry for a proper break, Victoria just a few kilometres up the road.

I get lost in Torroella de Montgri, east of Girona. Done nearly a thousand miles, never missed a turning once, not even round Paris, and now I'm not in the mood. I circle round the town, time and time again off the bike to chat to locals, then on again, riding along in the midday sun, never sure if they understood my questions or I their directions.

I finally find Victoria on my third pass through town. Her town house is fantastic - massive garage, endless staircases, terracotta and glazing everywhere (she's a graphic designer, her man a sculptor/stonemason) and a huge balcony with a view of the nearby mount and its haunting, derelict castle. We sit on the terrace, drink beers and find conversation flows just as quick and easy as time, in spite of the heat and my tiredness.

Only I can't relax. After almost three days in the saddle, I can't pause knowing I still have however many hours of riding left. I'd like to find a hotel here, set off in the morning, only in the morning I have to be a couple hundred miles south of here for my first property viewings, so no chance. And anyhow, I want to reach Tarragona today. It will be my base for the next week or so and I want to reach base camp tonight, want to unpack and wash and stay still for a while. Not hungry for home, not in need of stillness, just physically close to whatever limit.

Victoria offers me another beer, but after what feels like several hours of amazing conversation (she's lived all over the world, the States, Russia, Seaford in Sussex amongst others, all places close to my history and heart), I have to move. I put a brave face on, climb aboard the overloaded Triumph and fire off south, sorry business has once again got in the way of pleasure.

Girona slows me down, so I bypass Barcelona altogether and reach Tarragona around seven. My cruising speed's dropped along with my stamina, the last few hundred miles a real struggle. By the time I ride into town, I'm a mean, whingeing heap of bad vibes. The bike is tired, the rev counter still playing up, the traffic heavy and I've no idea where to find a hotel. I thought there'd be plenty around the suburbs, but only when I reach the centre do I see a sign for a four-star place with a name that sounds posh and expensive, even in Spanish.

At the top of a wide, quite boulevard, I stop just outside the Old Town's medieval fortifications, the place stunning in the setting sun, me heart not in any of it. All I care about is that the tourist booth is closed and the street map plastered to the window only shows three hotels. Three? In a town the size of Brighton?

I ride back down the hill, instantly fall in love with Tarragona's imaginative one-way street system. Ten harsh minutes later, I pull up in a narrow, cobbled street, the sea just visible at its far end. The Urbis Hotel gets my vote for sounding like Orbis, a Polish travel agency, and for only having three stars, one less than the competition. I don't want to pay more than a hundred Euro for the privilege of finally being able to stop.

The tiny reception is air-conditioned and the friendly guy behind the desk speaks great English (every night there is someone new at the desk and every one of them is friendly and speaks great English. And is called Jorge, young or old). There is a group of mean-looking, chain-smoking Russians in the lobby, but I receive the news of forty four Euro and available rooms with perfectly contained joy.

There are no flower prints or patterns in the room. It's clean and the air-con works. The window looks out onto an inner courtyard of dirty roofs and lines of washing, but even these details have enough of Spain to them to charm rather than repel.

I spend the next half hour trying to pick myself up off the bed, a delicious struggle. Should I stay here and crash out, or should I spend the evening eating, drinking beer and exploring before coming back here and then crashing out?

Can't remember if it's hunger for adventure or just plain old hunger makes me dress again after a shower and take the lift down to street level. Jorge advises me to eat in Place de la Font, the hub of all social activity in town. I nod and set out to follow the map he gives me, but crossing the Rambla Nova, a wide boulevard lined with lawns and endless bars, I'm distracted by a distant statue right at its end. Though tall trees and buildings line the avenue, there seems to be nothing behind the caped figure save blue sky.

I stroll up the buzzing avenue towards it and so discover the Terrace of the Mediterranean. Another stunning surprise. Nothing on the map Jorge gave me prepares me for it. A cliff edge, a beach hundreds of feet below, palm trees everywhere, villas surrounding the bay and the sea just starting to melt into the night. Whatever hunger I felt is forgotten instantly. I sit at one of the many tables set out the Terrace and order a beer from the ugliest waiter I've ever seen. Short, fat, blond, bespectacled and sweating, he looks like a German schoolboy bullied by life into the hospitality trade. Watching him bounce between tables, talking orders with a skulk, I wait for my Estrella and my attention wanders back to the view. And there sees something that makes up for all my tiredness and the waiter's comic gracelessness.

A skinny mulatto is sitting on the steps of the terrace, playing guitar. An even skinner white boy is fire-eating and sharing his fags. And with them, holding the collection hat, is a twenty-max girl, her long black

hair and long black skirt and shy, silent smile making me forget about everything I've passed by and seen and thought about in the last few days. I've always felt drawn to long black hair and amazing smiles, but even though this country is over-run with them, there is something beatific about this woman.

*The way she sits, legs tucked in, hands under her chin, smiling to herself. My...*

Orange string-strap top, cheap sandals and a way of moving, of brushing aside her hair that instantly makes me feel close to home, close to the heart of any journey. Even if she is not it.

**The most beautiful woman in the world standing at the railings, smiling to herself. Not at me.**

*Think I'll have another beer.*

Ah, the self-pity. Yes, I wish she would see and talk to me, and yes, I know I should do the same, but I know neither will happen. She is with them and I am alone and older and though I have a motorcycle and a hotel room and money and things to say, none of it will breach the distance between us. She's only here for one, maybe two nights, and the same is true of me. And nothing of what I see in her has to do with that kind of impermanence.

*The black guy singing Wonderful Tonight, skinny white fella fire-eating without conviction, the girl just sitting there, singing quietly.*

*Not to me.*

With a beer and whole table to myself, I've nothing worse to do than imagine what I would say if I did get up and try something. Forget the problem of language, of her relationship with the singer and the stuntman, of the slim crowd getting in the way as she moves between the railing, the steps and the fountain. What would I say if I were to interrupt her rounds? Seduce her with the truth? Hi, I wanted to talk to you because you're beautiful, but the kind of beauty I'm talking to you about is nothing to do with appearances, speaks to me of vulnerability and sensitivity and character and I'm talking to you now because I'd like to find out if you're a siren or a muse, to see if what I saw from the safety of that table over there is even stronger as I sit beside you, to see if we can take some time out of our separate trajectories and change plans, routes, countries and lives and see if home is here, in this time between us, if the need has got me now next to you will never need to be talked about, in any language, because you understand it anyway and us sitting here like this for years from now will quell it. Si? Puede comprar una cerveza por Usted? No? Mal, muy mal. Adios.

*The slit in her skirt is like a tear in the ordinary, showing me something of the other, but bimbo with a couple of tanned studs just sat down at the next table means I can't see beauty any more.*

I keep trying to look round my new, orange-skinned neighbour and her two boyfriends, see if somehow The Raven has noticed me too, is making eye contact, has felt me. I'm subtle in this, of course, like a coward. I should be sad, hurting, should need to be with her. I should want to hear her speak, want to find out what her skin smells of, what she likes to do in bed, what she likes to do in afternoons when there is nothing and nowhere either of us have to be. But this not a movie and the ending is not for me to write. I am only here as a spectator. I write because I can't speak, same as the guy running the kebab shop yesterday, him and his sketch pad, me and my note book, both of us wishing someone else would write our lines beforehand.

*If I decide to stay for another beer, they'll go. But if I go, they'll stay.*

*Now he's singing Wild Horses.  
I'll outstay them young guns.  
Uno mas.*

Travelogue4

Tarragona

At ten, I'm due at a petrol station near the river Ebro to meet Jeff, an English property dealer I found via the Web.

At nine, the morning is cold, wind riddling it with rain. I ride away from the hotel slowly, counting the sunny blessings of the days that got me here.

A narrow, monotonous motorway takes me towards a small town, where for the first time since I set off I have to stop and put my waterproofs on.

Once out of town, the motorway starts climbing through steep, banked curves. The rain is now lashing down, the mountains I'm riding into unwelcoming.

Mountains? Looking at the map, I didn't expect mountains. Typical Spanish plains, shrubs, the odd trickle of a stream, yes, but not what's ahead of me now. Just before I shoot through a highland tunnel, a bank of massive turbine windmills wave at me out of the clouds. Quixotic indeed. The road narrows and weaves even more, deep valleys popping out of nowhere, curves disappearing round rock faces, the road climbing into Alpine scenery. Christ, I can only imagine what these roads will be like when the sun comes out again.

My schedule for this week means I'll spend most of my time around the Ebro valley, so it would make sense to find a hotel there, but if every morning I'm going to have this for a commute, I'm staying put in Tarragona. Curve, curve, curve, peak, ravine, curve, curve, my heart, Christ, don't lose the front, could've taken that last apex at twice the speed, over-gunned the exit, brake, brake, shit, more bends, more, that dip, heart still elevated while I drop away through a pass and into a valley, talking to myself, laughing.

The rain eases off in the valley, stops spitting against the plastics I'm encased in. I pass through Falset, a pretty little town, then hit some amazing plains with 70, 80mph bends. I take it easy in the cool morning, but my mind already sees sunshine and speed everywhere.

Then more mountains, ridges and v-shaped passes, the roads sound, the cars few and far in-between. I'm looking for the Ebro, but all I pass by are dried-out ravines where water ran once upon a long-gone time.

Then, just as I start thinking I've misread the map somehow, it's there, way down below, a wide, angry beast of a river, again a total contrast to what I'd been expecting. After an hour of gut-curdling bends and rain-spattered surprises, I'm glad to see it, glad I'll be stopping soon for a quiet, still breather.

Jeff is meant to be waiting at the petrol station. I fill up, see a tall, gangly, ginger moustache walk out of the café (each Spanish petrol station seems to have one attached to it, no matter how small or remote), guess he must be it. The Englishman.

We have a quick chat, then set off in his car to look at properties. The brief is simple - find an abandoned farm with some sort of structure, farmhouse, barn, anything that can be restored and converted into a

rustic retreat for those wishing to try Catalunya as an adventure sport destination. I'm just here to do the talking. My younger cousin will be the one who will do the building work and run the place. He's restored several farms in Poland, has his own forest and timber yard and the plan is to ship raw materials in and assemble them here, saving us a bundle (Poland is still a hell of a lot cheaper than Spain).

Jeff drives us along the river and then turns off into a narrow valley. Since I was a kid, I've loved mountaineering, so the views here have got me sold already. The rain has lifted over the peaks and the vistas come straight from my childhood.

The first farm is nice, just under forty thousand euros, but access is difficult and the valley steep. It'll be hard to drive and park.

Then we drive on, into Paulus, a village built on a near-vertical hillside, and up, way past what I think the suspension of his family hatchback can handle. On the edge of a national park, mountains literally looming over us, another property. This one bigger, cheaper, the views astounding. It has so much character, writers not paragliders should be coming here to rest.

Aside from the evil approach, I love it, glad I took the digital camera. It means I can take lots of pictures, then show them to my cousin when he arrives tomorrow. Words are one thing, but I want him to see what I'm seeing, keen to spare him some of the surprises spinning my head today.

Jeff is a sweetheart, a little bumbling and confused. I'm not much of a businessman and our budget is tight, so I meant to act all hard-headed and inquisitive to come across as a serious customer worthy of his time, but any kind of poker face is unnecessary. Jeff is no salesman, just an English-speaker acting as middle-man to locals trying to sell bits of land to foreigners hungry for sea, sun and savings. Instead, I get Jeff to like and show me round the area, telling stories about the locals, the laws and his personal experiences of life out here. Priceless, and what's best, good news to hear, seeing as it seems to be a part of Spain peopled with reasonable, calm and welcoming souls.

I buy him lunch in a little town of Benifallet, back near the river. His wife was born here, and though they live in Tarragona for the work and the culture, they still have a beautiful town house as a weekend retreat. He shows me round his place like I was already a friend and introduces me to his Spanish mother in law.

Then, over a plate of roast rabbit, we chat to an Essex geezer lives off fishing holidays in the area. On the wall, there's a picture of him and another Englishman sitting on a boat, in their laps a catfish that looks heavier than my bike. I'm gobsmacked, but with a fabulously casual shrug he reminds himself to change the photo, superior catches having been documented since.

By early evening, he drops me off back at the petrol station where I left my bike. I remount and return to Tarragona the way I came, over plains and mountains now dry and dimming as the sun dips behind the high country behind me. Jeff wasn't pushy, the properties big enough, the landscape stunning and the locals welcoming. Barrelling home, I'm happy with the way things are developing.

After a shower, I ride back up to the Terrace of the Mediterranean. The dark-haired girl and her performing boyfriends have moved on. I order two beers, just to avoid having to wait forever for the ugly German to serve me again, then remember I'm still on the bike.

Having drunk less than half of what I pay for, I ride over to the Old Town. Amazingly narrow, cobbled streets rain Spanish on me from wooden balconies. A giant cathedral resides at the top of the Town, the

townhouses hiding it right until the instant I'm before it, admiring the pale, perfectly clean stone and the various shades of lemon light illuminating it. The courtyards are empty, no other tourists or business people to remind me of why I'm really here, perfect for solitary walks.

After some half hour of strolling, I head back to the hotel, hoping for football on the TV. Guess I am hungry for crowds and noise and emotion after all.

Travelogue5

Tarragona

Sunday. This is the first and possibly last day here when I don't have to be anywhere meeting anyone. My cousin is flying into Barcelona at 9.30 tonight, but seeing as Barcelona is 93km away and the train station only a five minute walk from my hotel, I text him with the train times and decide to enjoy what little freedom I'll have.

Straight back on the road I took yesterday. I fly past the wind turbines, dance my way round the mountains, sweep through sleepy little towns. The only difference is the sun is out today, and Spain looks like Spain ought to - monumental clouds marauding over the horizon, the plains full of dry colour, the roads wide and sticky and just begging to be wrestled with.

The day turns into a battle. A battle for my attention. The roads are made for fast riding, but the landscape begs to be admired at slow speed. I want to attack each bend at full lean, each straight at full throttle, but then every bend reveals another straight lined with vistas that want me to slow and look and rush nowhere. I tell myself that some day soon I will be more than just tourist here, that this time is for seeing what the bike can do, but it's hard. A hard compromise. Every mountain I pass I want to climb, every field I ride through I want to stop and lie in, every town I happen on I want to stop and meet properly. The mechanical hothead and the lazy mystic make shite bedfellows.

But the roads, Jesus, the roads. On the map between Benifallet and Gandesa there's a little wiggle of yellow that has Sunday Bike Blast written all over it. I turn off the red-marked Sweeping A-road and start on this humble little B.

Now, I've seen endlessly twisting roads like this in Bond movies and motorcycle magazine ads, but I'd always thought they were just Panavision and Photoshop bullshit. This is thing is all curves, five, ten, fifteen minutes along a narrow, boulder strewn valley, the sun baking, the tyres as sticky as they'll ever be. At first I'm laughing, then I'm actually begging the bends to stop. Too much. I'm laughing too much, working too hard, the road like a race track that never repeats itself, only I'm not a sportsman, no pro, can't wait to get to Gandesa, have lunch and do it all over again.

I have a pre-set three-course Sunday lunch in a restaurant that reminds me more of the working man's dining halls of Communist Poland than of the tapas bars I've seen in London. But the food is great and the people friendly, a charming young couple from Barcelona helping to translate the menu. They look like artists, literary types, and I'd like to talk to them some more, but it's clear they're here to visit the in-laws and so chained to their own table.

Drinking the local mineral water (fizzy and oily, but great for the weather), I decide to ride back to

the Ebro river and follow it to the sea, where The Delta D'Ebre, a vast landscape of marshes and what on the map looks like endless beaches, crowns the end of its snaking journey.

The yellow dream road is just as much fun on the way back, and then sweeping along with the river, the valley wide and lush with vegetation and farmsteads, is an amazing experience.

But half a day of being ran at full speed has tired the bike, and me. The gear-box feels shagged, cogs engaging with nerve-wrecking clangs, the rev counter still doing its independent thing instead of telling me what the engine is up to.

I get lost trying to ride onto the Delta. Jeff told me it was the biggest bird sanctuary in Spain and very closely protected, but I didn't realise this would involve road-signs that did their best to send you everywhere but in the right direction.

When I finally do make it onto the flatlands, the side winds sweeping the endless rice fields and canals are so vicious, I'm constantly either pushed under the wheels of oncoming family saloons or into the paddy fields.

For some fifteen kilometres nothing but straights and danger, the heaven of the yellow dream road a distant memory. By the time I finally arrive at the beach, I'm too tired and sullen to really enjoy the place. The sand is indeed endlessly wide and endlessly long, but the only place to sit and rest is a hut half way between the tarmac and the sea.

I crawl my supersport-class tyres across packed sand, both legs hanging down as stabilisers. By the time I reach the hut, I've had enough. The sky is clear, but the wind only good for the kite-surfers bouncing off the waves. The water is right there, but the gear I've got on isn't quite right for scuba diving. The bar has beer, but, being mobile, I can't have more than one kiddie-sized can of Heineken. Even that may be too much, depending on Spain's drink-driving laws (one of the things I failed to research before setting off). Alone, staring out to sea, I don't feel calm. An empty beach is a great thing when you're with others, but when you're alone, it's just full of echoes of better times gone by. Women, barbeques, conversations. High, memorable, photo-op times that you'll always remember and always miss, like they were designed that way, meant for sentimentality.

Last year, on a beach much like this one, I nearly drowned. I make myself remember what it felt like to be somewhere between shore and death, and then finally on shore, drinking beer, smoking, suddenly handed the very thing you so badly wanted just moments ago. Life. It felt amazing then, water drying on my skin, the wind against my scalp, each breath an experience. But now, here, on this lawn chair, beer and fag in hand, watching three youngsters kick a ball about, some fat bikers on Jap Harley-clones struggling to get off the beach with their fat wives riding pillion, I have everything I wanted in that dark moment a year ago, but I'm too tired and ill-disciplined to enjoy it today.

Pussy. Pussy-yo. That's what the boys back in prison would call a man like me in a moment like this. I'm here, on a Spanish beach, a black Triumph parked right behind me, a full packet of fags on the table, the sun shining, life how I've always wanted it around me, and I'm too weak and too ready to whinge to enjoy it. Nah, fuck that, as the boys would say. I get up, remount the bike, crawl back to the tarmac and tear through the harsh gearbox, the winds now pushing me along, instead of showing me aside.

Mountains on my left, the sea to my right, for a whole hour between Tortosa and Tarragona.

My cousin, Grzech, is due to fly in at 9.30, then get from the airport to the train station to catch the last train at 11. I'm sure he'll make it, I know he will, but I stay sober watching Euro 2004 anyway. Just to be

on the safe side.

He texts me when he lands. Texts me from the train between the airport and the station. Then texts me at 11.09. He's missed the last Tarragona connection. I grab both bike helmets, spend ten minutes in reception listening to Jorge (the small, middle-aged version) failing to explain to me exactly where the train station is in Barcelona, then set off.

Haven't done any night riding for a while. I'm back on the coastal motorway, empty save for the glare of my high beam picking out far-off warning signs. Bends, speeds, sidewinds. All things irrelevant to me as I try to make Barcelona in no time at all.

Night-time motorway riding is like floating on a magic carpet. Nothing around you, nothing in sight, just the headlight and the dials and the sensation of moving through time and space without any effort at all. In some ways, it's a lot more fulfilling than daytime motorways. No cars to look out for, no views to worry about missing, just the road to follow and the black silence for company. Amazing.

Long, diving bends, tunnel after tunnel approaching Barcelona, toll booth after toll booth of sleepy attendants awoken slightly by my cheery, midnight Spanish wishing them a good night.

It's almost one by the time I find Grzech round the back of Barcelona Sens. Two a.m. by the time we've flown the 93k back to Hotel Urbis. At eleven the next morning we have an appointment with Gerhard the German property salesman in Tortosa, another 100k south, but instead of going to sleep, we open the bottle of home-made spirit he's brought back from his farm in the Polish Lake District. 60% alcohol content with a subtle hint of apple. We're off the motorway, the darkness behind us, but on this kind of fuel the conversation can fly a long way yet.

Travelogue 6

Tarragona

Monday morning, we're back at work, barrelling along the same route I've woken to the past two days. Grzech's weight on the back makes no difference to the Triumph's triple engine. The bike's big, even more stable at speed two-up, or maybe it's just me taking it easier with a passenger on board.

Grzech doesn't smoke, but I can't help stopping often to have a fag and take the sights in. Still can't believe how high and wild this country is.

Gerhard the estate agent is a tall, ginger German with a strange, hungry smile. I don't bat an eyelid when, watching some pubescent girls walk by later in the day, he tells me he was once married to a fifteen year old Filipino.

First, he shows us a wreck of a finca, the stone shed invisible for weeds, the hillside steep and bereft of all views. I want to consider the pro's and con's of every place we see, but Grzech is clearly a more decisive buyer. Not a word I say makes a dent in the look of absent disinterest the first finca leaves him with.

The next place is a world away. Great access road, high up over the river, the mountains all around is. The

hillside olive plantation is well-kept, the house tiny but almost ready to be moved into (it would be a good place for Grzech and my other cousin to live in while they build the farmhouse proper - a solid, two-storey structure that could house up to thirty thrill-seekers in cramped, but comfortable conditions).

The last place is just round the hillside, right on its crest, a couple of hectares of olive trees and man-made rock terraces. There is no building to speak of, but enough materials to build us a castle. With some left over for a sight-seeing tower.

I offer him lunch (the cost of property sales people's time and petrol is in their commission, but I consider the cost of a meal cheap investment for the info I get out of them while they chew) and he drives us back to Tortosa, where over fish canapé entrees and grilled squid, he regales us with tales of local warmth and his own sexual conquests. Tells you something about the quality of the food that somehow our meals are not spoiled by his company.

I mention that the hotel in Tortosa is a lot more expensive than that in Tarragona, even though Tarragona is a much bigger and classier town. He picks up the phone and, for tomorrow, books us into an apartment in Tortosa with a bedroom each at half the cost of the local hotel. Nice one, you old perv.

Now, a beach would do both me and Grzech good, but we have to go back and see the highland properties from Saturday.

Grzech loves them, much more animated here than he was with Gerhard's offerings. The structures are solid and easy to convert, the sights stunning him same as they did me, the very air of the place different to what we've seen today, less rural Spain, more wild mountain retreat.

Felix, a sweet and helpful local working on behalf of Jeff, drives us everywhere in his 4x4, including a secret place in the forest where the people of Paulus have their fiestas. Paulus has about a hundred and fifty houses, and in the nearby woods they've built some hundred and fifty solid-stone tables and benches, all up the tree-covered hillsides, one per house, the sight both magical and overwhelming in its scale. If only JK Rowling had the imagination of these locals, I might not have such a passionate dislike of pre-pubescent wizards.

It's getting dark by the time we set off back to Tarragona. I take it easy on the country roads, the chance of something jumping or flying out of the dark much, much higher here than it ever is on motorways.

We get back to the hotel after eleven, finish the bottle of spirits and head off to bed, too cautious and too tired to talk impressions yet.

Travelogue 7

Tarragona

Tuesday morning's the same as Monday, and our commute just as special.

James is a grotesquely fat Northerner, in his fifties, driving a beat-up Grand Cherokee he says only cost him four thousand Euro from a Customs auction house. I think about Annette Benning in "American Beauty" and her estate agent's brand-new Mercedes M-Class, but forget the car, something about James' floppy blond hair gives him the air of well-bred English trustworthiness. Unlike either Jeff or Gerhard, he's a registered Spanish Estate Agent (from web research, I know this means something, unlike back in the UK, where anyone can register and

start selling shit) and has a quick wit, quick both in acuteness and hurry. He flicks through a portfolio of about fifty properties, allows us to select a couple and drives us off at high speed.

The first property we see is lame. A simple, if solid, stone barn, four hectares, but no views of the mountains or the Ebro and far from the sea. Seeing he's failed to impress us, he drives us to a place way beyond our means, a twenty hectare estate owned by a Colombian once chased out of Spain by Franco's men. It costs three times what we can afford and is way, way too big for what we need, but I sense he's studying us as we walk around the property, taking endless pictures and chatting amongst ourselves in Polish.

Once he's learnt enough, he takes us to the property he thinks will actually suit. Much closer to the river and the sea, at the top of a ridge covered in vineyards, 360 degree views of the mountains, the price is eighteen grand, less than half our original budget. There is no water or electric, but unlike the mountainside places we saw last night, it's nothing five thousand Euro can't fix. The house is no more than a shed and the property a mass of ancient weeds, but we love it. The instant we climb over the wide rock walls which surround the plot and would be perfect building materials for a much bigger building, we become excited, swapping ideas and visions the instant they occur. James stands back and, like any salesman who knows it's always the product that does the work for him, lets the buyer-love happen.

We don't hang around too long. I suspect both of us fear if we stay there any longer, we'll start putting down roots before the place is anywhere near ours.

Jeff drives us back to the roadside hotel we'd met at, refusing my usual offer of lunch. I like him even more for it, not because he's saved me a few pesetas, but because it shows class. He's got things he needs to be getting on with, and having been in the business longer than Jeff and Gerhard put together, knows where to draw the line with potential clients.

At six, we're due to meet Gerhard in Tortosa. He'll take us to our apartment, I'll leave Grzech there and go back to Tarragona for our bags. It'll take several hours of riding, but I don't mind playing courier round these parts.

Gerhard arrives late, and with bad news. The apartment is not in Tortosa itself, but about 8k outside of town. He insists he told me that yesterday, which is a lie, but I expect it of him and don't want to argue.

Not yet. The place might be interesting, and after several days of going city to city, hotel to hotel, I'm keen to spend more time in the landscape itself, keen to stop and see what life in country here might be like.

Then there's more bad news. The man whose house the apartment is in has crashed his car on the way here. Into a pedestrian (Gerhard's broken English for you). We hang around for a while, listening to Gerhard trying to get some sense out of the other end of the mobile phone. It seems the man has spoken to the police and has to return to his house to get some documents, so Gerhard decides to lead the way.

We follow him on the bike, ten minutes of riding along narrow, busy roads that swoop between villas and olive plantations. Then we turn off onto a rock-strewn dirt track, bumpy as hell and worse for the bike than the beach on Delta D'Ebro ever was. With Grzech on the back, the engine pummelled with rocks thrown up by the front wheel, the track goes on and on while my patience runs right out. And then I see we're riding along a municipal rubbish dump, a long canal dug out of the earth and filled with refuse.

By the time we arrive at the villa, I'm too angry to talk to Gerhard. I light a fag, walk back down the drive to take another look at the landfill, make sure my eyes were not deceiving me.

No, it was just Gerhard. The dump is there, my eyes fine, my temper suddenly cooling. Walking back to

the house, I realise it is gone seven and we need to get out of here ASAP, no point arguing about bollocks. The house owner is an old Irishman, and still looks shaken by the accident. Then, from his conversation with Gerhard, it becomes clear he's not shaken by the accident, but by the realisation he's left all his car documents back in Ireland. Driving licence, ownership papers, insurance certificate. Gerhard keeps asking how he could do that. The Irishman looks around him with irritation, clearly baffled by the notion anyone would expect him to bring his documents with him when moving abroad. Grzech is in the house, the room nicely furnished, clean and spacious, but though it's late and I'm in no mood to tackle that dirt track and the ride back to Tarragona now, there's no way we're staying with this nut. When I tell him we're out of there, he asks if we want to buy his English-plated van. I don't comment, just have a quick go at Gerhard about the track leading here and the madman on the edge of a landfill site. The big German nods and hangs his head without countering, which works for both of us. It means he can slip away without an argument, excusing himself with pressing business elsewhere, and I don't have to watch a temper which doesn't like arguments, verbal confrontations, and as such, gets aggressive when aggression can only do more harm.

We slowly crawl back to the tarmac road, prise a few sharp rocks that have got stuck in the grooved tyres and could tear them up at high speed, head back to the motorway. I'd like to ride back along the smaller coastal roads, show Grzech the sights, but it's too late and we're too tired. We agree on the motorway and hang on while the bike rushes us towards beer and food and a little quiet.

Once we've dumped all the bike gear in the hotel, we stroll up to the Terrace of the Mediterranean, have an ice cream followed by a beer and a photo session with palm trees and sunsets.

Because the Old Town is free of tourists, it is also full of the kind of real-life magic places only peopled by locals ever are. After strolling around the cathedral and tall, narrow streets, calm Spanish voices floating down from endless wooden balconies, we find a bar which isn't yet closed. The beer is good, but it's too late for food and Grzech is hungry. Walking on, we find a little courtyard behind the cathedral covered in tables and candle light. Wondering which little restaurant's seating area to choose, we see one with a waiter whose ugliness is a match for the blond guy from the Terrace, and a waitress whose beauty compensates for the absence of the Raven from my first night here.

It's the waitress who comes over to serve us and like the tired, slightly drunken males we are, we consider this a confirmation of our good looks and animal magnetism and monopolise the poor girl for the rest of the night. She doesn't seem to mind. Our struggles to communicate in English and Spanish seem to entertain and she's smart enough to see how harmless these two drunken bozos talking in a strange language are. When we laugh as she walks away, it's sweet not seedy, and when she catches us looking at her while she stands at the edge of the courtyard, I know she sees there is longing, not lust, in our eyes.

Several beers and a bottle of local wine later, we bid Rosalind farewell and stroll off into the sleeping town with a carrier bag full of Heineken. Must be two a.m., we find ourselves on the roof of a multi-storey car park with a great view of the sea at night. Over the bay and the foaming cans, we finally get off the topic of business and catch up on real life.

The last time we met, it was New Year's in Warsaw, and we were both in relationships then. Me in England, Grzech back there. Now, six months on, both alone, both far from our respective homes, we can reflect on our separations, or reflect as much as the booze and warm Mediterranean breeze will allow. This isn't the time or place for moping. What we've seen of Catalunya so far is good, better than good - the mountains, the river, the beaches, the history, and the women, yes, that too comes into the equation. I dream out loud, about us, here, five years on. The adventure B&B business evolved, expanded, others taking care of it for us. Each with a cute

little flat in the Old Town, no longer tourists but locals now. Each with a dark-haired Spanish wife to teach us how to speak and be happy. Me lecturing at the local university (Jeff promised to put me in touch with some friends he has working there), Grzech doing more to educate Catalans about ecology and paragliding. After a year of planning and discussing this business over the phone, it feels so good to finally be here, so close to the dream, we stay on that car park roof until we can dream no longer and need sleep to continue.

Travelogue8

Tarragona

Wednesday, the last day of scheduled appointments, and Grzech seems out of sorts. I'm not surprised when, after reading a text message on his Polish mobile, he tells me he might have to fly back today. He says he's made a commitment to his new boss back in Gdansk and has to be back at work Friday. I try talking him out of it, reasoning that the last-minute flight will cost him a month's wages, that this trip is more important to our futures than a couple of days back at work, even drag him to the nearest travel agent as soon as it opens, find him a coach line that will do Tarragona-Warsaw at a quarter of the airfare's cost, but he won't change plans. He's made a commitment to someone, and even if it's impractical, expensive and pisses others off, he will keep his promise. I know Grzech well enough not to try arguing with his logic. It is both flawed and admirable. He's forked out a fortune to be here already, last minute June Warsaw-Barcelona flights far from discount, seen the place with me. kept up our end of the deal, now he has to go back and do the same for someone else.

Over breakfast, I tease him a little about his pride and tonight's Festival of Light. The whole district will fiesta instead of work tomorrow and Tarragona's been preparing itself for days, stages and lighting scaffolds put up in the streets, kids letting off firecrackers until late in the night, a general mood of festivity about the place, all things Grzech will now miss. I know I should leave him be, know how gutted he feels to be leaving Tarragona and the bike behind, but I feel sorry that he didn't tell me about this last night (I knew how tired he was and wondered why he let us stay up talking for so long. The pleasure of my company? Nah, he knew it was his last night here, didn't tell me not spoil my fun..). Still, we had a couple of days together, and if all goes according to plan, we'll meet in London in a month's time to finalise plans and then be back here soon enough to put them into action.

We say goodbye on the market square, just outside the hotel. His flight doesn't leave until 4p.m., but I have an hour in which to make Gandesa. Over a hundred kilometres away, it is where the yellow dream road ends, but today I haven't got time to detour after rainbows. Today I have to be viewing the last group of properties, so I leave Grzech to watch the last of the preparations for tonight's festival happen and shoot off.

Midweek feels like midday here. My stay here started cool, like a morning, but it's been getting ever hotter since. The bike is more responsive without a passenger on the back, and laying it down into corners, I'm braver than I was two-up, which makes up for Grzech's absence. I don't dwell on it, though. He's the one will be feeling sorry for himself right now, no point me joining him there.

I haven't seen a policeman since I arrived in Spain, not even in the centre of Tarragona. Now I have an excuse to hurry, the clock winding down as I crest mountains and dive-bomb valleys, I start pushing the bike again. The air is dense with heat, the roads sticky and the landscape feels like it just wants me to explore section of the speedometer I wouldn't normally venture into. Still, I'm starting to get scared. There are animal carcasses littering the tarmac, sand blown in off the plains, holes and batch patch work done in places where I know

vertical and horizontal, life and death, are in the difference between single digits - seconds in reaction time, the odd mph, a few degrees of curving apex. Two-up, I always held back, kept within the safety zone of being able to go round or out-brake anything that might jump out on us or be hidden round some corner.

But now I'm alone and listening to what the bike wants, I realise it does not feel fear. So far, I've explored my limits as a rider, as a man, found out how important speed is in comparison to life in one piece. The bike is not satisfied, though. It doesn't care if it crashes and burns. All it knows is what it was made for, and that is balls-out speed. It wants to rush, wants to barrel into bends. That's its nature. It's in the race-derived engine, the close-ratio gearbox, the 180-section rear tyre. The Speed Triple is famous for its stability when cranked over and the howl of its triple-cylinder 900cc powerplant. And now that I've learnt these roads and scrubbed the tyres in over a thousand miles of motorway, it wants to see what I can do.

I do Gandesa in just over an hour. That's an average speed of around 60mph, tame for motorways, but for the kind of terrain I've just covered, it's quick. Quicker than I've ever wanted to be.

I park the bike carefully by the estate agent's office (the first of its kind I've seen so far), stand back and stare at it with awe. I pushed it further than I wanted just now, and it didn't once feel fazed. Always ready for more.

Inside the office, I wait to be seen, sweating the ride off in spite of the air-con. A Spanish father and son team show me some properties in a portfolio, but I also finally get to meet Alexis, a lady I've only so far spoken to via email. She doesn't work for the estate agents themselves, but as an independent advisor/interpreter. Doesn't advise me to see any more places today, but to get to Tortosa before three and speak to someone in the Departamento de Turismo and Comerc. She is calm, but I can see she has doubts about the project we're proposing, whether such a venture will even be possible, regardless of the size of our budget. This is what she's been advising all along in her emails, and while I wanted to see some properties when I got here at first, now I'm quite keen to talk to someone other than salesmen. The properties are there to be had, but legally speaking, do we have a second leg to stand on?

Tomorrow is a fiesta, and all businesses are closed. Including the Departamento de Turismo and Comerc. I'm due to leave the morning after. The father/son sales team don't mind showing me round some properties tomorrow, so I ride off, back to Tortosa. Back along the yellow dream road.

It is laughing with me, the bends no less stunning or surprising the second time round, but something in me has seen the other side of the machine I'm on. Its limits are beyond me, beyond what I will risk to match them, and I feel a little sorry I can't meet its expectations. We have fun, but I can't help wishing for a much smaller machine. "Big bikes are for those who can't make small ones go fast" and I'm starting to see, no, feel the wisdom behind that biking maxim. A big bike is built either for motorways or racetracks. The first are boring, the second for pros only. Which leaves smaller machines, those that shake, howl to get anywhere near their big brethren's pace, feel like their going fast at sixty instead of a hundred and sixty. My Triumph can't do more than a hundred-forty, but it will do it regardless of length of road or angle of lean. Meaning it's great on the straights, but insane in the bends. Anyone can make a bike go fast in the straights. No skill in just twisting the accelerator. But twisting it while leant over, chasing those hundred horsepower with the apex suddenly closing and the bend blind, that takes more madness than sense, and I still like to work the other way round. On a small bike the straights are boring, but then there are those views to finally take in, and the bends, those can be attacked instead of defended against. While I was learning these roads, my skills were enough. Now I'm a better rider, the bike wants more from me, only there's too many hazards on public roads for me to deliver. Caning a smaller machine feels just as fast and fun, but doesn't cost as much when pulled by the law or hurt as much when downed by the unexpected.

By the time I reach Tortosa, the day is pushing the needle on my thermometer past forty Celsius. After lunch, I meet the boss of the Departamento de T. and C. and his younger sidekick. They are extremely friendly and helpful, staying long past closing time to explain to me the parameters of the law round here. With the help of numerous drawings I did over lunch, trading their English and my Spanish, it becomes clear our project is profoundly flawed. All the "fincas" in the area are built way before 1950, meaning the buildings can be restored, but not extended or added to. And even if we find a property big enough to accommodate all our guests, to register as "casa pages" (B&B) we must show an income from the land dating back at least three years. Meaning we'd have to farm here until at least 2008 before we could start trading. The laws are here to protect the area from extensive development (guess the idea of thousands of pre-fab villas filled with sunburnt Brits does not fit in their vision of the unique Ebro Valley) and can't be gotten round.

I thank the Spanish gents, and then thank my luck that Grzech didn't stick around to hear this news before having to set off back home. Although I know that we will find a way to do what we want here somehow, either through a town property or some other means (building structures half-submerged beneath the soil is one option), I'm still sorry to wave a tentative goodbye to the mountainside houses and grapevine plantations. Both were agricultural land and both look way beyond our reach.

Back in Tarragona, I console myself with a beer and phone calls to Jeff, Gerhard and James, telling them off for wasting my time. It's not that I'm angry, I just want a reaction, want to see what their response will tell me about how much they knew and whether to keep on working with them regardless.

Jeff is all apologies and shy excuses. Clearly, the man has no idea what he's doing in any branch of living, so I leave him alone.

Gerhard says he told me about the business restrictions from word go. This is just more of his bollocks, so I ask why he then wasted my time and his petrol driving us round properties he knew we weren't likely to buy. At this point, he runs out of excuses, so I sign off before wasting any more of my money running up hotel phonebills.

James comes up with the answers I want. He says to take it easy, there are ways around things here and that, yes, granted, the paperwork is complicated, but he told us that (true) and not impossible (I still believe that) and for me to call him next week. He will find out whether the 18,000 Euro property can be registered as non-agricultural land and therefore freed of the restrictions placed upon such places. Throughout the call he sounds unfazed. I like that. He may be lying to me just like Gerhard, but at least he's managing some style to go with it.

Without my cousin, the walk around town feels aimless. Just something I have to readjust to. I have some fried prawns in a dingy yet cute place near the hotel, then start to look around for signs of festivities, but apart from the deafening noise of firecrackers going off on every street corner, there isn't anything happening. No dancing in the streets, no fireworks (I was promised those), no fiesta to speak of. Even the live music stage set up outside my hotel is quiet, lights hanging limply from the scaffolds, a crowd of empty plastic chairs facing the empty stage. I assume everything is set up for kick-off tomorrow and retire to watch Spain lose to Portugal on a projection screen in a local bar.

It is unlike any bar in England. The Peruvian-looking waiter brings me a bottle of wine in a specially chilled clay vase. The whole bottle costs what a single glass would in London. There are families here, but they have come to eat as well as drink, have dressed up and there's not a hint of violence or aggression anywhere. Not an ounce of loutishness. I love it. Suddenly, watching football with a bottle of wine and some cute, happy Spanish locals for company feels like a sensible way of spending the evening. No screaming, no chanting, none of that in the air. Feels like I'm in someone else's house, and a house I like at that. Too bad I bring no luck to

it, Spain losing fair and square, but I try not to blame the result on my presence here.

Jorge the hotel receptionist is inconsolable. He seems to still be capable of humour, but I'm told Spaniards are fanatical about their football and, though I'd like to stay and chat, decide not to bother him too much with my drunken presence. Working in prison, you learn a lot about hidden tolerances, about lines that are invisible, and learn not to come near them. The results are never pretty.

Travelogue9

Tarragona

My last day here and the last I will ride the Ebro Valley. When me and Grzech return next month, we've planned to hire a car, and Christ knows when I'll get to ride these roads again.

Still, I take it easy. In my heart, I've already said goodbye to the Triumph. It is, without a doubt, the prettiest and meanest production motorcycle I've ever seen, but all that crap is good for sixteen-year-olds' bedrooms. All-black, two-hundred-kilo road rockets do not fit well into the real world, and unlike most bikers who like to own the latest and bestest, I like to think that's where I do most of my riding.

I launch it out of turns when the road is clear and the angle of lean sensible. If I can't see what's round the next bend, I assume it's something big and hard, as opposed to small and avoidable. And I finally let the views catch up with me. I stop more often, smoke more cigarettes, let myself be late for once. Gives me time to say goodbye to the place.

Salesman senior, Alfonso (introduced to me as Fonzie), drives us out of Gandesa in a brand-new Hyundai jeep. He speaks worse English than I do Spanish, but my recent summit with the local bureaucracy has left me with a feeling of utter linguistic confidence. We discuss football (why does everyone here pronounce the name Rooney as Ronnie? Takes me a while to work out who the hell they're talking about after I finish slagging-off Captain Beckham), geography and women. In a vocabulary of five nouns, two adjectives and a pronoun, this is some feat, especially during a slow twenty minute drive out to the country.

The first property is dull and useless. Large enough, sure, but far from the river and sea and no good for falling in love with.

The second is better, up on a short but steep incline, huge boulders surrounding the house like an immobile guard. There's lots of land and material to play with, and Fonzie seems impressed with my way of studying the land and my sense of humour. He laughs so hard, his straw hat falls off when I joke about the property being good for banditry, having two separate roads leading to it, one in a ravine, the other up a wooded ridge. Especially if we open our B&B without the necessary papers.

In the car, he says what everyone here says in the heat of the usual summer afternoon - impossible to drive here without air-con. It is unbelievably hot outside, the chassis baked to a degree so brutal the air-con has trouble cooling the interior, but I still wonder what it was people did here before its advent. Never left home before sunset?

Fonzie drives me back to the Triumph and we part, both of us ready start the fiesta. This is my last day here, and I want to taste the sea. The only way to do this is to ride back to Tarragona, leave the bike and gear at the hotel and go down to the beach below the Terrace of the Mediterranean. Not a bad way to spend an

afternoon, I suppose.

I dump the bike in the underground car park, borrow some towels from my hotel room and walk down to the beach in shorts and sock-less trainers. After a week encased in protective clothing, it feels like I'm walking around with nothing but skin on.

The fiesta seems subdued. Nobody in the streets, all shops closed. This last fact is painful, as it means no beer for the beach. And I need beer for the beach. This, in case I haven't mentioned it before, is my last day here, and I'm not doing it dry.

The seafront in Tarragona is silly. There is no way to get from the Terrace to the beach - the railway lines are in the way and no one's thought of digging foot tunnels. I have to walk the long way round, to the docks almost, before I can get across. It's only ten minute walk, but when you see the beach and still don't know if there's a bar on it that will serve chilled alcoholic beverages, impatience shortens my fuses.

All is well, though. There's something calming in the Latin surroundings, the wide, flower-filled squares and the children playing about in them like they were in a park and not the city centre, that soothes my Slav soul. Seeing sand blown in between the rails as I cross them makes me smile, as does sight of a bar just before the beach. They don't just cool their drinks here, they just about freeze them in chest fridges, which is great news for the cans of Estrella I take with me.

The beach is pretty, the curved bay giving it a sense of cosiness. The sea and sky are perfectly blue, but the beach surprises me by not being overcrowded this fiesta afternoon. I swim and drink and swim and sleep and stare at topless girls and smoke and feel like a little hermit saint, alone, far from home, not caring at all about any more movement. Getting back to England, returning here for more business, riding again. None of it matters. I feel satisfied, and as much as it pains me to write it, I'm cool with that. Never was interested in being satisfied, always wanted happiness or bust. That's why I've left homes and women and friends, in pursuit of the ultimate. And though I know it's still possible, regret nothing of previous plans or movements, now I'm alone and quiet and there's no happiness here, it feels fine. Chasing anything more than the warmth of sun on my skin, the beauty of strange women around me, the laughter of kids falling off orca-shaped lilos, seems like too much effort. I'm not happy here, but at least I'm not lying to anyone, acting any parts, suffering anything. In solitude, I feel very complete. A fag, a cold beer and the blue, sunlit universe before my eyes and there really is nothing more I need right now.

And the same goes for my last evening in Spain. The bar on the corner, Greece-Czech Republic projected onto a huge wall, a pinball machine in the corner, wine for six euros a bottle and peanuts thrown in for free. Calm as fuck.

Travelogue10

Tarragona

I want no more motorways for a while. I didn't mind entering Spain by that quickest of routes, but I've since grown accustomed to the place, at home with it, and don't want to leave without saying goodbye.

I mean to set off early, make the most of the Pyrenees later on, but by the time I'm packed, had the last of my fabulous Spanish hotel breakfasts and said goodbye to all the Jorges (three of them in reception that morning - one coming, one going, one doing minor repairs), it's gone ten.

The sky is heavy with low clouds, but the heat feels like it will keep the rain off me. I settle at a cruising speed of around seventy five mph, only five less than on my daily trips to the Ebro Valley, but it somehow feels seriously slower. Maybe it's the knowledge that I have to take it easy, spare myself and the bike for the day ahead. I want to get deep into Southern France today. Going too slow will not get me there, too fast will tire me out with the same result.

The sky is grey and so is the landscape all the way to Lleida. The mountains are gone and so is the colour from the earth. I feel dopey, not ready for a whole day of tense, high-speed cruising.

I stop at a petrol station in a foul mood, buy a can of Red Bull and a couple of souvenirs to go with it. A black Spanish bull sticker for the bike and a red t-shirt with the same motif for me. A quick chat with the smiling people behind the till to explain why I'm sad and buying this cheesy, overpriced crap, cheers me up somewhat. The Spanish smile is good for all kinds of ills and not easily extinguished.

Nothing happens until about one. After three hours of endless plains and small towns, I stumble upon Embalse de Santa Ana, a man-made reservoir snaking its way through the most arresting rock formations I've ever seen. Suddenly, my heart is beating faster, the head spinning this way and that, trying to take in the glory of those rock faces and the translucence of the waters. For the first time since France, I stop and get my camera out.

The tunnels I've just shot through have to be captured on film, even if no technology on earth can do the view justice.

The road has stopped sleeping, stars snaking round the contours of the long, narrow reservoir. Mountain walls tower over us as I weave the bike this way and that in an endless serpentine of sights and speed. Magnificent. The best road I've ridden so far, bar the yellow one, but that was minus views and luggage.

This is the start of the Pyrenees. The road changes along with the elevation, no more boring, featureless straights, no more kilometre after kilometre of car-free tarmac. With the twisties come the slow coaches, family hatchbacks scared of the sheer drops, juggernauts scared of crushing the family hatchbacks. My attention is too taken up with overtaking to enjoy either the bends or the views. I'll come back, I keep promising my eyes and the landscape, soon.

The Tunel de Viella is amazing, ten, fifteen minutes of continual descent into the heart of the mountains. Straight, cold and eerie, like something from a bad fairytale. I've been in many caves, through tunnels under the Thames and the English Channel, but this place has an ambience straight out of Tolkien. Pure Mordor. And it kills the Pyrenees for me. When I ride out the other side, lurching in Viella, an unwelcoming highland town, the map says I'm about to ride past peaks of 2500 meters in elevation. Proper Alpine stuff. But when I remount and ride off towards the French border, the monsters never meet me. I seem to have bypassed them somehow, the road running through featureless valleys all the way to France. A few trees, fast highland brooks, lots of tourists. But no head-spinning heights, no forbidding rock formations, nothing to wonder at.

Suddenly, the Pyrenees are over. Just like that, around St Gaudens, I'm back on flat land. Fields everywhere, no hills, no undulating plains. Still no sunshine.

At least I'm making good time, I think to myself without enthusiasm, the adrenaline rush I felt around Embalse de Santa Ana gone, leaving a bitter vacuum. The motorway towards Toulouse is closed, so I boost back up to ninety on the A-roads, needing a wake up call. I've taken enough cash to cover any speeding fines I might yet incur, figuring what's bad for the gendarmes may actually be good for my nervous system, dispel the air of

melancholy I seem to have ridden into.

Then more motorways and toll booths. Toulouse tries to hold me back with a clogged-up ring road, but it's nothing compared with the Peripherique I've got on the menu for tomorrow.

Somewhere along, I see a guy on a brand new Triumph Boneville Thruxton, but he's either scared of my faster Triple or still running his engine in. I lose him almost instantly and the road is all just me and endless cars again.

There comes a point about seven p.m. when boredom just drives me off the motorway. After hours of passing endless wheat fields and those large, brown signs advertising the delights of whichever district I was just about to pass through, I exit at the first available opportunity. Don't know where I am, can't find myself on the map, but by then I no longer care. Any exit from motorways should have a hotel or two plying its trade by it, and as I ride back onto empty B-roads, I'm on the lookout for such an establishment.

And they're there, advertising cheap rooms with Canal+ in every one, but I've done one roadside hotel on the first day of my trip here and after a whole day in the saddle want, no, need some character.

I ride on to Cahors. And find exactly what was called for. A historical little town, a beautiful river winding its way round hills that overlook it, streets straight out of a Bordeaux postcards. No hotel in sight though. I ride around, stop to ask, the cobbled streets lined with bars and flower boxes and I badly want the journey to end now, to rest and take it all in. The easy-going, quiet nature of the place, so different from what I've been through all day, is a tonic all of me is crying out for.

I eventually stop in a side street, where an empty, melancholy-filled bar has rooms for rent. I will never forget the middle-aged blonde barmaid. She is polite and friendly, but does not see me. Even when she walks with me a couple of medieval streets to where the rooms are, my attempts at conversation fail completely. She is slim, beautiful, but how to describe the deep nature of her abandon to sadness? Yes, she knows Paris, but has never lived there for long. Yes, Cahors is nice. No, she was born in a little town I can clearly see she's not interested in describing. We enter a building with the interior of a castle, a stone spiral staircase leading up to my room, a heavy old key, so different to the slim, hi-tech hotel room keys I've got accustomed to, opening my door. There is a tv without a remote. A wardrobe without a door. A toilet without a seat. Perfect. I tell her its perfect, hoping she'll at least smile at my eccentric lack of taste, lack of need for luxury, but nothing. No light in her beauty, no interest in anything new.

I shower and leave a mess in my beautiful old rat-house of a hotel. Back down the spiral staircase, out the castle door, walk around the whispering river, take a few pictures of the wooded hills the other side, even a couple of another vast cathedral. Once again I fail to capture the view's might, decide to quit scale, go for detail. A streetlamp, a gated alleyway filled with brightly-dressed puppets, a bar with a couple of brand-new muscle bikes parked outside. No more postcards, only memories I alone will take from this place.

Tonight, France fight for their place in the Euro 2004 final. I stop in a bar, eat spaghetti bolognaise and drink a six-Euro glass of beer just for the privilege of watching the game in the company of others. The food is good, but the goals are not forthcoming and I'm in no mood for squinting at a little screen over the bar. Unlike my local in Tarragona, this place is packed and reminds me of an English pub. I pay the bill and leave the French to wait for something to happen.

The town is pure charisma, but I can't get any hooks into it. I'm passing through and now I'm on my way home,

this fact makes me feel too light, too insubstantial to hang around the streets for long. I go back to the hotel, just in time to see Greece score the winning goal. The champions are out. Shit, I smile to myself. Defeated with one text-book header by the rank outsiders. Greece in, France out? In football? Shit.

The game over, I undress and slide under the starched sheets, but something is not right. I get back up, dress again, walk back to the little bar where I took pictures of the muscle bikes. The machines are still there. I go in, order another overpriced pint and sit down with my notebook.

Arms hurting after all day battling curves and 90mph motorways, but didn't want to sleep. Now in some silly bar, with "Whole Lotta Soul" playing, a ZXR1200 and a XJR1300 burbling outside on illegal pipes, need to write something.

*Learning about hotels. Am I impervious to their lonely, disposable air? Walked around town, tried to take photos, but gave up. didn't feel like they would capture anything for anyone. I'm here, and those who never will I don't want to parade pictures before.*

*Took a few pictures of details, but I miss books. Should've taken something with me to read. Don't want real company, but words would do me. Words would fill me up.*

*Don't even feel like looking at women, much less talking to them. though in the passing they sound nice, the French containing a little of the magic this place feels like it's hiding. Photos didn't have a chance of capturing it.*

*Maybe I'm getting to tiredness. Sitting here, the mind still hungry for action, it's the shoulders and eyes that feel sore. Guess motorcycling doesn't challenge enough. The road too straight, the challenge too insubstantial. Where do I want to ride to? Tarragona to Tortosa felt good. The growing familiarity, the sense of going back and forth and still closer and closer. Business at speed.*

*But heading back, rushing through mountain passes, through towns where there is no one I will ever meet. Maybe I need a slower bike, one will force me to change tactics with the road, with people, with time. will force me to interact. This business of ballistic travel seems too much like teleportation. Missed the views, had to fight the bike from running off the road, off the mountains.*

*People here, talking round the bar. I'm glad to be alone, glad to have a pen, have nothing to say, and only that, if only that, to write.*

*Need to learn something from this journey. Some payback in terms of story. What do I want to get out of Paris tomorrow? Romance, yes. But in what form? Will I rush through there too?*

*Tiredness making me shiver, but it feels good to be here, noisy, loads of people, fluorescent lights, music booming, and I'm still writing.*

*Am I gonna come back empty handed? That's always the question. Feels like there's something to be garnered from this trip, but my intellect is too rusty, too caught up in obvious conversation to profit.*

If the beer was any cheaper, I'd have another, but a four quid pint is a little much for my thirst. I walk out, head back towards the river. The size of the town means it sleeps early and doesn't pollute the sky with either carbon monoxide or light. The sky is riddled with stars, the river silent, the hills on the other side perfectly dark. It is quiet and feels much safer than any English town at this hour. I stare into the sky, but my neck is too sore, so I lie on the low wall guarding the riverbank and fly right up.

The universe is unbelievably warm, those few glittering specks of starlight very close to me. In times past, I would lie here and wish a woman would walk past and do the same, match me in this moment. Now, I have gotten so used to that wish, it no longer counts. Now, in France I am the man I have always wanted to be and if "she" never makes it this far, I will forgive everything and everyone. I will stare at the world in many times like this yet and think "Done all right, all right for a mortal, and if the soul is more than that and still hungers after communion, its time will come in some other place, some other dimension. Here, for now, is beautiful enough for a solitary child still happy to be alive." Yeah. Staring into the heavens, happy tonight, without reservations.

Travelogue11

Cahors

I wake perfectly content. The stargazing did me good. The morning is hot already as I walk down to the main street where I left the bike overnight (Between parking it in a small, out-of-sight street and busy road, I'll always choose the latter. The Triumph is a rare beast, meaning no professional thief will touch it, and only professionals will ever take the risk, or have the skills, to nick a bike chained to a public spot).

As I stick the key in the ignition, I'm already planning the trip down to Paris, only when I turn it, not much happens. Nothing but a sorry whine from the starter motor.

Shit. The battery's dead. So far, I've checked all other fluids - brake lines, coolant, oil. All, save the water level in the battery. Only the night before, I'd noticed it in the handbook and made a mental note of picking up some distilled water next time I made a petrol stop (only petrol stations carry such stuff) in case it needed topping up. And now it's dead.

I push the bike down the road, trying to bump-start it, but the incline's too shallow and the bike too heavy for me to manage it. Done it lots of times on smaller bikes, but I'm not even sure if it's possible with such a high-tech engine (it is, of course, as well I should know, but panic invites doubt and doubt breeds ignorance).

Downhill momentum delivers me the café/hotel. I breathe out. It's happened. The thing I've been waiting for, the breakdown. I'd hoped for a hassle-free trip, which apart from the rev counter and the bike falling over in Valras it has been, but I never counted on it. And now it has happened. I get out my mobile and ring the number I had prepared long before this trip started. RAC Europe.

The nice man on the line says it will take them half an hour to reach me. In that time, I collect my luggage from the room, drag it down to the café and sit with a glass of OJ and a fag, chatting with the proprietor. His English is almost non-existent, but I manage to explain what has happened. He makes a joke about all British bikes doing this, but for some weird reason, I can't take it, trying to explain to him just how solid and reliable the new line of Triumphs are, compared with the stuff produced back in the Seventies. Strange how stress and disappointment can rob a man of his sense of humour and replace it with jingoism.

Rescue arrives in an open-top Porsche 911. The mechanic and his wife and kids are all here, their Saturday evidently disrupted by my misfortune. Still, they are truly friendly. First, pushing from behind, he helps me bump-start the bike. Then, I follow them to the nearest bike shop to have a new battery fitted.

As the mechanic works on the replacement, I play with his kids on the garage forecourt and pray the new

battery will get me home, but my prayers are not enough. The new battery is full of life, a digital gauge attesting to its charge, but it still won't turn over the engine. Only a jump start from another battery does the trick. The other mechanic explains "ze battery, when is kaput, aaa, zis kill ze... ou you say it, starter motor". Fuck. Where the hell am I going to get a new starter motor from round here? It is five to twelve. At noon, everything round here shuts for the weekend and only Christ knows where the nearest Triumph dealership is. And whether they'll have the necessary parts for my 95 carb-model Speed Triple. Fuck.

Everyone's trying to be helpful before they clock off for another sun-baked weekend. "Raide zee bike to London, no stop zee engine, no? You need, you park on 'ill and go down, push, yes, and go? No stop zee engine.." Yes? Cahors to London, two days of riding without once turning the engine off? Are they mad round here, or are they just trying to get rid of me before kicking off a truly hot weekend?

As I say goodbye to them all and ride back to the cafe, I'm desperate enough to consider the idea. I have two keys to the bike, meaning I can unlock the tank filler cap without removing the main key from the ignition, so petrol stops are not a problem. If I get to Paris this way, I only have to bump start it in the morning and then coming off the ferry and I'm home. Just two bump starts. In theory, better than being stuck here indefinitely.

Back at the café, I leave the bike outside with the engine running and go in to check the list of French Triumph dealers I printed off the internet before departure. The nearest one is in Montauban, some fifty miles south of here, but so what, it won't open until Monday, and if it needs to order in the starter motor from the UK, shiit..

I go back out, pass unhappy faces having early lunch at tables set out on the pavement. The searing heat is enough to unnerve them, but the English-plated Triumph's twin pipes booming next to their meals just fucks them right off. I stand in the sun, the bike already extremely hot to the touch, and stop the engine. No way. If it was December, maybe, but there's no way this plan to run the engine from France to England is going to work. Too far, too hot, too silly.

There is only one hope. That the mechanic's were wrong, that the starter motor is fine and all the machine needed was a few minutes at tick-over to run enough electricity round its circuits again. I put the key back in the ignition, turn it and press the starter button. The engine bursts into life. Ignoring vicious looks from the diners beside me, I kill the engine again and try to start it again. Again, it works.

I stop it, put the key in my pocket and go back in again, pouring with sweat. The blonde is back from the morning market, as beautiful and disinterested as yesterday. Her husband smiles at me sweetly as I order another OJ and light another fag. Fuck, let's just finish these, five minutes, cool off, then go back outside, try the engine again. If it works, I'll load up the luggage and say goodbye to this most charismatic of places. If not, I'll stay the weekend and fuck work on Monday. Maybe I'll work a little on the expressionless barwoman, make friends with her husband, find a place that sells English books and finally read something (no, shit, it's all shut here until Monday, innit), either way, finally have something go wrong on this trip, some accidental adventure.

Five minutes later, the adventure is over. The engine starts and I leave. Must be about half twelve by the time I load up the bike, set off slowly, counting my blessings without enthusiasm. There's a little part of me knows that to continue with plans is sensible. But there's another part, the part that felt so at home on that fiesta beach in Tarragona, that doesn't want to move, doesn't want to make the ferry on time, or London tomorrow, do the unpacking, washing and phoning round before being back at the prison Monday morning.

The bike runs on without complaint. Unlike the route that took me to Spain, the way back avoids the glories of the Central Massif for the flatland pace of Southern France.

The only thing which interrupts the monotony of the central European motorway system is happening on other bikes.

Once, a Honda Fireblade jumps out of a side exit somewhere past Clermont-Ferrand. It's engine is the same size as mine, but the machine is much newer and built for racing. Still, at speeds below "the ton", I have no trouble keeping up. We keep overtaking each other, time and time again, speedo needles wavering between 90 and 110 (mph, not kph), seriously illegal but not suicidal speeds. It is literally the only thing that catches my attention all day, that twenty minutes before the other rider ducks down behind his full-faring and blasts off into the distance at a speed I finally refuse to match.

Apart from that, there is a dull sort of loneliness that settles on me the rest of the way to Paris. Physical discomfort, the approach of things already seen, not the new or at least novel, the tedium of endless overtakes and petrol stops. Nothing new and nothing notable. For four hundred miles.

With stops for petrol and fags and the odd nap, I make Paris by around eight. I feel tired and grumpy. A scooter rider with a bare-midriff girl on the back flips me a finger for riding too slowly through the crush of the Peripherique, and the only thing that stops me chasing him and exchanging further pleasantries is the fact that he's speeding between cars twice as fast as I consider sane. I grit my teeth and motor on to the other side of Paris. I want to find a hotel there, ready for the morning off, leave my gear at a hotel and ride back in to see the sights.

Without a city map to cling to and short on attention span, I somehow miss the last turn off past De Gaulle Airport, meaning I've managed to miss Paris itself. Strange. Suddenly, I'm staring at signs for Lille. Shit, I'm too tired for this. For more forests and overtakes, especially now that daylight is fading.

A few kilometres on, there's another exit, and though I can't see any hotels from the motorway, I chance it anyway.

Lucky. A whole neighbourhood of chain/franchise hotels just past the turn-off - Formule 1, Holiday Inn, B&B.

Or not. I tip the bike into car park after car park, dismount and wait in the reception area and ask all the receptionists if they speak English and they say "A little..." and I ask if they have a room and they ask if I have a reservation and I say No and then they say No, we're full. Fuck. B&B (that's the name of the hotel chain) is the last one in the vicinity and after waiting in queue for what seems like an intolerable forever, dirty and all encased in bike gear, I get to the receptionist and ask if they have a room and he says Only for four to five people and I ask How much and he says Sixty Euro and I say You have saved my life, my friend. It is Saturday night and Paris has room for me. Halleluiaah.

This is the last night of my trip and I'm so tired, I don't mind being back in the sterile blandness of a brand-new hotel. A hell of a contrast, going from the medieval character of Bourges to this twenty first century functionality in the space of one day, but considering where I stayed the first night of this journey, it's a nice, circular development.

Where my room last night had a key that looked like it ought to fit the door to the local cathedral, this place has a digital combination lock with a computer generated pin-number. I've got two floors and three beds, all to myself. A toilet with a sterilised seat. A shower room that smells overwhelmingly of cooked turnips.

I shower, make a call to Poland (some friends are getting married, and I like the idea of calling them from

Paris to send them my love) and head back to the motorway and Charles de Gaulle.

The sun is setting and the road empty. Half nine. Everyone who had any business being in town on Saturday night is there already, all except me, though watching the sun finally set on Paris, it feels good to be late this once.

As I come off the Peripherique into the city centre, I have with me the street map I asked for when booking my room. Just so I don't bypass it again. The map, just like my hotel room, is a bland bit of tourist comfort, but it saves my life again. I always thought London's streets were poorly signposted. I take that back, London. You're the model of predictability compared with this place. I'd heard that during WWII crafty Frenchies switched or removed signposts and street signs to confuse Gerry, but I'd have thought they'd be back up by now. But no, Monsieur! That would spoil the mesmerising charm of this most beguiling of magique places!

And magnificent it is. The architecture, Parisians' dress sense, the café's spilling out onto the streets. I don't want to waste time trying to put all these pictures into words. Everyone knows what Paris is about, knows its stereotypical reputation, but you have to go and see it for yourself to realise that it loses nothing in charm and brilliance by being everything you've always wanted it to be. I love it when dreams come true and it feels this good.

Montmartre's cobbled, 45 degree inclines are deadly on two wheels, but I can't stop my head from spinning like a beacon. So much beauty, so many details, such finery in the people and their street corners. I could live here. No, I want to live here. I don't want to be a Parisian, don't want to pretend I could ever be part of this place (I'm part of too many places already, too much me), but I'd just like to live here for a while. I know they've all done it - Kerouac, Hemingway, Pinter, Mailer, Orwell - but I'm not afraid of following in such footsteps.

After a beer and a mushroom steak near Place Pigalle, I ride down to see the Eiffel Tower before the final motorways and bedtime.

A year and half ago, after 30 years of going back and forth between the UK and Poland, Paris was my first ever taste of "foreign". Only four days, but what an impression.

I will never forget getting out of the Metro and turning round to face the Louvre. I'd spent some time before the trip reading up on the place, and was surprised to find this one gallery contained all the things London needed several buildings to house. Paintings, antiquities, modern art. The Louvre couldn't possibly be the two Tates, the two Nationals, the British and the Victoria museums all rolled into one.

But it was. Christ, the staggering scale of it. I'd like to say, to think, I'm impressed by details, not bombast, but this?! Suddenly, I knew why we still had a Royal family, while theirs had been wiped out in the ugly madness that was the Revolution. God could get away with the kind of cathedrals that crippled the coffers of whole states, but not mortals. For such follies like Versailles, for projects that cost thousands of lives and bankrupt France whole, the royals had to finally pay with their ridiculous heads.

But look at what's left. Compare the Arc the Triomphe with Marble Arch. The stained glass glitter of Nortre Dame with the smog-stained greyness of St Paul's. And the space-age silliness that is the British Airways London Eye with the pharaohesque scale of the Eiffel Tower. So what if it could fit sideways into the Millenium Dome? Compare the two - Paris has a Colossus right in its heart, while London has a giant white-head zit on the arsehole that is the Borough of Greenwich. And to think they only meant to keep the Eiffel Tower for a couple of years before dismantling and scrapping it. What disposable style... wonder what will be left of the Dome or the Eye in a hundred years time?

Sick of taking the street map out of my pocket every couple of junctions, I tuck it in behind the little nose fairing of the Triumph. Then watch it slip out and away right in the middle of Place De Gaulle.

If you've never driven round the Arc de Triomph, try it. At least once. Forget your Matterhorns, bungee jumps and train surfing. If you want mad kicks, this cobbled roundabout with a dozen turn-offs and no lane markings, on two wheels, at night, delivers. In spades. It's so chaotic, you don't have time to be scared. I laughed, cars cutting right in front of me like they meant to kill me, until the second the map flew away. I managed to exit without being trampled in the dark, pulled up and walked back to the edge of the mayhem. It was still lying there, right in the middle of the five-lane road. With no traffic lights and those dozen exits, there's little chance of finding even a seconds gap in which to run across all those cobblestones, snatch the map from the ground, make it to the other side, then do it all again, map in hand. But it has to be done. Without that map, too tired to think straight, to find my own way out, I'll be stuck in Paris until another kingdom come to this unholy republic. Shit. I light a cigarette and laugh. Running this French gauntlet is exactly what I need right now. Two thousand miles of riding, only to die trying to cross a road less than half a day's riding from home. Fuck it, I think, finally seeing a tiny gap opening up, rushing for it, snatching the map from the cobbles, rushing on, panting hard beneath the Arc, then doing it all again in one major sprint to the other side, to where the bike is waiting. Arc the Triumph, indeed, I think, still smoking, still laughing, as I stand by the bike and try to catch my breath again.

What else can I say about the Eiffel Tower? I spend just ten minutes parked on the bridge right beneath it, neck too tired to crane up for long and take it all in, then remount. Eleven at night, unlike Montmartre, this place is still overrun with tourists and international coaches pulling up every two seconds to load and unload. Summer by the Tower is no fun, no matter the hour.

Riding away, though, I'm pleased. I kept my original promise to it to return on my way back, and have been rewarded with some amazing sights. Rejoining the motorway, no longer in need of any more maps, I know I'll sleep sound again tonight. Even if, just like my first night in France, I still can't find anywhere that will sell me a bottle of wine at midnight.

Travelogue12

Paris, a few kilometres past the airport, Sunday

That's it. The last night is over. I pack, load up the bike, instantly forget the door's pin-number combination.

Something about the sky, and the day it hovers over, seems unfinished. The morning is hot already, but it looks bland. The whitewash of cloud will do no more than hold heat in, along with moisture, an expected contrast to the eye-burning blue of Spanish heavens.

I have less than two hundred miles to go before the ferry, but it taxes more than the previous two thousand. Not in body, or mind, just in patience. There are more motorcycles here, most going my way, but they all come in two's or threes and seem keen to stick together instead of racing strangers.

Having said that, watching others ride shows you more of how different people are. In the machines they ride, the formations they hold, the way the modded Ducati or Aprilia in the pack always leads, followed by Hondas and Beemers, Yamaha TDM's and other Jap steel following in orderly, hierarchical arrangements. I watch them ride together. Nobody overtakes a mate, no one blasts off for a minute or two, nobody steps out of line or

does anything insensible with the throttle. Not even for a minute.

I leave the groups to it, wondering if I would be the same in such packs, just as conformist.

By the afternoon, I'm so bored and distracted, I end up in Dunkirk instead of Calais. A forty mile round-trip mistake that pisses me off far more than yesterday's battery failure.

I blast my way back from the Sunday ghost town that is Dunkirk, rejoin the motorway, overshoot Calais going the other way, towards Boulogne.

I could've sworn there were no signs directing me towards the car ferry, but by the time I actually find the right route to the port, I could swear at anything and anyone. Never got lost in Paris, in midnight Barcelona, in the Ebro Valley, not until this last little leg of my fucking foreign journey. Fuck. I'm booked onto a 15.30 crossing, but I'd hoped to make an earlier one, get home quickly, get all the Sunday night chores out of the way and still have time for a calm fag and beer and a breather. After all, there's work waiting tomorrow. But the tiredness and the tedium mean I reach the ferry terminal just a few minutes too late. 14.40, meaning I have to wait almost an hour for my scheduled crossing. Fuck. The wind is wickedly strong, the sea choppy, clouds all blown out of the sky. Instead of putting my bike on the next ship home, I feel like turning right back, howling the triple engine out of the port and returning where I've just come from, all the way south.

Cigarettes and sombre chats with other queuing bikers keeps me in place long enough to board.

I've crossed the Channel about forty times in the past ten years (all London-Warsaw coach trips), and never has the sea been as rough as today. It only eases off once we approach Dover, and even then we're delayed, other ships struggling to leave the port before us. Seeing the familiar white cliffs, I feel nothing. Gone through a lot of emotions recently, simply have none left for familiar sights.

The M20 back to London is impossible. I've read that, compared with the rest of Europe, Britons have terrible motorway lane discipline, but this is the wrong moment to prove all that right. After what now feels like blissful solitude of Spanish and French autoroutes, the M20 clogs up around Ashford and stays that way all the way to the M25. Furious, I start riding like a Parisian pizza delivery boy, filtering motorway traffic moving at well-below the speed limit. I don't have time for this. Not today. For jams, for ditherers, for fast lane hoppers. Fuck you all, I wanna be home at the appointed hour, six at the latest, don't have the time, not a single second to spare any of you.

The M25 is moving, slowly but surely. The sun is out now, at my back, warm and languid, Sunday-style, sharpening the colours of cars and passing woods. Pretty. I know this route well and finally start to feel calm, to feel good again. The trip is coming to an end, but the Spanish business is far from finished and I'm returning to a job I like and other projects I like even more. Sunday afternoons feel good when the week ahead holds gifts instead of grim obligations.

Then I see the cloud. Forget War of the Worlds or Armageddon or Independence Day. This is special effects done Gaia-style, by the fibres of the planet whole. With the sun behind me, the black slate filling the sky dwarfs everything I've seen so far. The Terrace of the Mediterranean, the Ebro, Paris, all literally pale in comparison with what's ahead of me. With the colours all around, the journey almost over, I smile at the black curtain just about matching my approach speed. If this is how London wants to welcome me, come on.. A little rain after all this way will just be poetic, will be beautiful.

If you could see beneath my visor right now, you'd see me smiling. Knowing there are road works coming up to Chertsey, only ten, fifteen miles from home, I exit the M25 and head for Kingston, the last large borough before Ealing. I even stop to take a couple of photos, try to capture some of the contrast between sky over there and black menace over here, but no lens can span what I'm about to ride into. I'm still smiling, still gasping as I ride on, ready to get soaked before pulling up outside my tower block to dry off and light up and finally stop to look back.

But nothing, and I mean no amount of wisdom or experience, can prepare me for what happens next.

Feeling the first spots of rain, I shrug off the thought of stopping to pull on my waterproofs. Only a few miles to go, a little rain can't hurt. Then the sun goes out and the world turns biblical. Just one roundabout, one set of lights and suddenly I'm submerged. I know all the A-roads round here, but it's raining so heavily, cars throwing up not spray but waves of water behind them, I've no idea where I am. In an instant, all my summer gear, my rucksacks, all of me is soaked. I'm wearing waterproof boots and gloves, but without the jacket and over-trousers, they simply fill up with water and freeze all my digits solid. I can't see where I'm going, the traffic almost at standstill, my road-weary shoulders aching with the weight of water pouring all down my back and crotch.

I've never seen such rain. I'd like to laugh, the way I did when I stuck in Tarragona or retrieving the street map in Paris, but this is no joke. It has suddenly gone dark and freezing cold. I'm shivering, knackered and the traffic will not let me move. I pull off the A-road, ambling down streets I don't recognise, not laughing any more.

Just when I near what I think is Kingston, I come across a road dipping beneath a railway bridge. It is filled with water. As I pull up, a motorcyclist steams into the waves, up to his knees, and that's riding along the invisible pavement. Madness. I consider following, but when I think about hitting an invisible pothole or the engine cutting out half-way through, the bike and all my gear suddenly submerged and lost for hours to come, I go no further. Just then, a white Renault Clio steams in and gets stuck, its headlights just below the surface of the swirling water. The driver tries to restart the engine, but gives up after the third try. I don't stick around to rescue him, U-turn in the deluge and disappear down some strange-looking side streets.

The next hour is worse than anything I've experienced in fifteen years of motorcycling. The weather has stopped Sunday evening traffic in its tracks. My choice is to stay stuck with it, hands and feet soaked and getting ever more lifeless with each minute, or to try squeezing past, visibility next to nothing, the chance of a frustrated driver U-turning on me at any point ultra-high, the likelihood of my frozen limbs managing to brake and keep the machine upright next to none.

After three days in the saddle, I don't chance stillness. Got to move on, got to keep going, the risk of my body seizing from the cold and the tiredness all too high. Kingston, Richmond, Kew, Chiswick, they drag past, minute after ugly minute. All the time closer to home, all the time more tired, less in control. I'm not thinking about home, not thinking about Spain, not thinking about anything but surviving this. This time last year, I nearly drowned trying to learn how to swim in the Baltic. Now, I'm suffering the very same shock to my system in the heart of West London.

Enough horrific words. Enough fear. I make the last, indicator-less turning, then the last straight, then I'm outside my tower block. I pull up by the door, in a little alcove where the rain can't reach me or my bike. I dial 13 (my flat number) on the intercom and ask my father to come down. And bring some dry fags down with

him.

The next hour is spent smoking and thanking everything I still believe in for letting me live. Cigarette, change of clothing, tea with vodka, another cigarette, remove the soaked luggage from the bike, kiss the marvellous engine just got me home, glass of beer, dry hair, check the camera. The camera. It's digital, meaning if it got wet and short-circuited, two hundred pictures are gone. Two weeks. Two thousand miles.

Two days before leaving England, having given up trying to fix the indicators, I bought a £10 bum-bag as consolation for the electrical failure.

Today, containing my camera along with my cards and my passport, it is the only thing to survive the deluge bone-dry. My just reward for having survived.

Fifteen minutes after I have my father take pictures of my soaked gear and luggage as proof of all of the above, the sun comes back out. I have him take another picture with the miraculous camera. This time I'm already changed into dry clothing, standing in our kitchen, kissing the Triumph key in gratitude for the bike's ark-like resilience, sunshine blazing outside our window.

Once the picture is taken, I look at it on the digital camera's display screen. The sun is indeed shining, trees glistening with tons of wet crystal, the key to my lips. But I'm not smiling. Not yet. Not ever. The rain was meant to be a joke, English sense of humour, anecdotal. It wasn't supposed to try and kill me. And so there I am, staring into the camera, acting the fool with the key being kissed, but my eyes are not joking. They have seen much, and far, and are in no mood for humorous endings. For half-hearted morals. This one picture whole tells whole the story. Of sun and rain. Of motion and breakdown. Of light and darkness. And of me, at the centre of it, staring dead ahead, grateful for much, but not finished, not done, nowhere near finished yet.

#### *EPILOGUE*

*A year on from this trip, after many parties and much hard work and plenty of moonshine downed - my cousin fell in love with a friend of mine from Krakow and left London and I haven't seen him since... He's since had two kids with the daughter of my father's ex-girlfriend from the Philippines, and continues investing in his property in Poland while constantly vanishing from everyone's radar... what is that old saying about never going into business with your own family? Ahem... Yeah, the sweet kid I remembered from our Communist era childhood turned out to be a completely unpredictable and untrustworthy adult (not even his own kids know where he is most of the time).*

*I have since been thrown out of jail in London and left England and after 5 years in Poland, am ready to revisit the idea of buying and living on land in Catalunya...*

*My life story in brief since here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marek\\_Kazmierski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marek_Kazmierski)*